Joshua 14:6-15 *Legendary Caleb: Still Strong*

***Getting Older***So Beth and I went on vacation last week. It was actually our 25th wedding anniversary trip. We marked our 25th in January, and we decided we wanted to take a trip to Boston, since Boston is the home of Paul Revere and 25 is the Silver Anniversary and Paul Revere was a silversmith, so obviously Boston is where everybody should celebrate their 25th, right?

But, of course, who wants to go to Boston in January? So we waited until summer and we had a wonderful trip and we saw Paul Revere’s house and it wasn’t very romantic and then we walked down the street and we ate Cannolis, and that was very romantic, and so we had a good time.

And when I got home, I got all these emails from our airline and our hotel and our rental car agency asking me to complete surveys about our experience. Now, normally I don’t fill out surveys like that because who has the time and who knows who is monitoring all that information and I just don’t feel like it. But for some reason, this time, I clicked on one of the surveys and filled it out. Maybe I was hoping they’d send me a free night or something, but that didn’t happen.

But after I answered all their questions, they asked me for some basic demographic information including my age. Now, maybe this is an indication of how often I fill out things like this, but I was really struck by the age question. Because it was a multiple choice question, and they had broken the age ranges into categories, every ten years. So there was a 16 through 25 option; a 26 through 35 option; a 36-45 option, a 46-55 option, a 56-65 option, and then the last one, I think, was 66 and above.

And what struck me is that I’m now in the category goes from 46-55 (I’ve been there for more than a year, but that shows you how often I fill things like this out, since this was the first time I noticed). I’m middle aged. I’m in the category that includes the 50s, an age which previously I’d always considered old.

It hit me, as I filled out this hotel survey that didn’t even win me anything free: I’m old!

I don’t really feel old. I don’t think of myself as old. In fact, I’ve always thought of myself as rather young. But, I am now middle aged. I am, as the saying goes, just about “over the hill.”

And the evidence is all around me: I’m letting my beard grow out, and it is just as much gray as it is any other color. My daughter, just the other day, called me a “silver fox.” I think that’s supposed to be a compliment, but it is also kind of an insult. I was at a 4th of July party, and somebody told me about a vision test their grade school son had taken. He was shown a bunch of pictures of common objects and asked to identify what they were. And one came up that he couldn’t identify. Not because he couldn’t see it well, but because he literally had no idea what it was. It was a phone! Not a cell phone. But a regular phone—the kind that plugs into a wall, with a handset and a cord. Obviously, they need to update their vision test. And, of course, I can still remember rotary phones. I’m old!

But, here’s the thing: I don’t want to get to the point of thinking that “over the hill” means things are going downhill. I don’t want to start feeling like because I am not longer “with it” that I am not longer relevant. I especially don’t want to fall into the mindset that thinks I am done serving or growing or following Jesus.

In fact, while I may someday retire from active ministry—that is, my job as a pastor may someday come to an end—I don’t ever want to think that my commitment to or usefulness to Jesus will ever expire. I may retire from my job, but I will not retire from serving Him.

And for my inspiration, I look to the Biblical story of Caleb.

***Wholehearted***We are in a summer series of sermons called “Legendary.” The idea is to look at some heroes of faith from the Old Testament. And not necessarily the big stories that most of us know—stories like David and Goliath or Noah and the Ark—but some of the other stories—B-list celebrities from the Old Testament.

And today I want to talk about Caleb, who at the age of 85 was still eager to fight giants. **This is a story about whole-hearted commitment to God. And whole-hearted commitment to God for the long-haul.** This is a story about a man who was “over the hill,” but didn’t go downhill. A man who never retired from his faith.

His story is found in Joshua 14:6-15. **Let’s take a look:**

**6**Now the people of Judah approached Joshua at Gilgal, and Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him,

Let me set the context. This is at a time in Israel’s history known as the Conquest of Canaan. Joshua is the successor to Moses, and he is the leader who is going help God’s people take possession of the Promised Land. A couple of weeks ago, we looked at the story of Rahab and the destruction of Jericho. That was the first step in the Conquest of Canaan.

This story, and this conversation between Caleb and Joshua, takes place shortly after Jericho’s destruction. **Here’s what Caleb says:**

 “You know what the Lord said to Moses the man of God at Kadesh Barnea about you and me. **7**I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the Lord sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions, **8**but my fellow Israelites who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt in fear. I, however, followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly. **9**So on that day Moses swore to me, ‘The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly.’

Joshua and Caleb have a shared history. In fact, their partnership goes way back. Caleb is referring here to something that happened 45 years earlier.

The story—from Numbers 13 and 14--is that after Moses led the people out of Egypt he led them to Mt. Sinai where he received the 10 commandments and then he led them directly through the wilderness to the border of the Promised Land. But before the people went in, they wanted to know what lay before them, so Moses appointed 12 explorers—one man from each of Israel’s 12 tribes—to go in and make a reconnaissance of the land. Joshua and Caleb were two of these 12 explorers.

These men spent 40 days exploring Canaan. They observed who was living in the land, the size and the fortifications of their cities, and also the quality and abundance of their fruit. In fact, the Bible says they went to one of the vineyards in the land and “cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes” that was so large it took two men carrying “it on a pole between them” to get it back to the camp. (Num. 13:23)

In other words, they found a land that was very desirable. A land flowing with “milk and honey” just as God had promised. (Num. 13:27) To this day, the **logo of the Israeli Bureau of Tourism** is two men carrying an enormous cluster of grapes between them. It was the Promised Land they had been dreaming of since the days of their enslavement began almost 4 centuries earlier.

But when the 12 explorers reported back to Moses, 10 of them focused not on the potential of the land, but the problems it contained. Here’s **a portion of their report:**

“…the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. **29**The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.” (Num. 13:28-29)

These explorers come back not with thanksgiving for what is about to be theirs, but in terror of those they must defeat in order to get it.

The list of peoples in verse 29 should be a checklist of victories that they are about to experience. Way back in Genesis chapter 15 each of these peoples (Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Canaanites) are included in a list of peoples the LORD promises He will deliver into the hands of Abraham’s descendants.

Plus, there are the descendants of Anak. We’re not exactly sure who these people were, but apparently they were huge. These are the people living in the neighborhood where that giant cluster of grapes were found. People who eat grapes of that size must be correspondingly huge themselves. In fact, there was a rumor flying around the camp that the Anakites were direct descendants of the Nephiim (Num. 13:32-33). The Nephiim are the mysterious “sons of God” from the days of Noah who were marrying the daughters of men and having gigantic descendants. Obviously, these descendants of Anak cannot be related to those Nephiim, since they were wiped out in the flood, but the very association shows you how huge and scary they appeared to these explorers.

So instead of inspiring confidence in the people, the report of these explorers instills panic. **Numbers 13:31:**

**31** …“We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are…” **33**We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

This may be a half truth. The explorers might have seemed like grasshoppers in their own eyes, but we know that’s not how the Canaanites saw them. We know from the story of Rahab that the residents of Canaan were actually melting in fear because of the Israelites (Joshua 2:11). But it doesn’t matter. This report triggers a rebellion against Moses and against God. The people are not willing to fight for what God has promised them. They are not willing to enter the Promised Land.

Except Caleb sees things differently. Of the 12 explorers, only he and Joshua are not afraid. Here’s what **Caleb says:**

**30**Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” (Num. 13:30)

And then**, a bit later**:

**6**Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes **7**and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. **8**If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. **9**Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them.” (Num. 14:6-9)

Where others see obstacles, Caleb sees opportunity. He knows the Lord’s promises and he knows what Israel has been called to do. Because the Lord is with them, he sees no problem with devouring the Amalekites and the Jebusites and the Hittites and the Anakites and anyone else who gets in their way.

But the people cannot be persuaded. They actually talk about stoning Caleb and Joshua. And God becomes as angry with them as He has ever been. Ultimately, He decides that an entire generation must die out before the Israelites will be allowed to enter the Promised Land. For 40 years—one year for every day the explorers were in Canaan—they will wonder in the desert until every adult who journeyed through the Red Sea has died. **Numbers 14:22-23**:

**22**not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times— **23**not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.

There will be only two exceptions to this righteous judgment of God: Caleb and Joshua. **The next verse:**

**24**But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it. (Num. 14:24)

This is a great description of Caleb. In fact, I can think of very few places in the Bible where an individual receives higher praise from God. Caleb has “a different spirit” and he follows God “wholeheartedly.”

This is what Caleb is referring to in **our passage from Joshua 14.** This whole story is the reason for this conversation that Caleb and Joshua are having 45 years later. Caleb stuck to his convictions. Even when everyone else was panicking, Caleb had faith.

So, here’s our first lesson from the life of Caleb: **be wholehearted in your commitment to God.** Caleb is praised by God for having a different spirit. He follows God wholeheartedly. We should do the same.

The heart metaphor in the Bible has a lot to do with courage. When people are described as being afraid, the Bible says that their hearts “melt in fear.” When someone in the Bible wants to encourage someone else—that is, when someone wants to inject a little courage into somebody—they will say “take heart!” When Caleb has the courage of his convictions in spite of the other explorers quaking with fear, God says that he follows God “wholeheartedly.”

The lesson I see in Caleb’s life is that we should have courage to remain committed to God.

Now, that’s easier said then done. “Be brave” is a slogan we often hear thrown around these days. “Have courage.” But there needs to be a good reason to be brave. We have to have a sturdy source of confidence.

If a little boy is afraid of the dark and his father says to him: “Be a big boy—be brave!” and then snaps off the lights and walks out of the room, that really doesn’t help. But if Dad comes into the bedroom, opens the closet doors and checks under the bed, and then says something like: “There’s nothing here that can hurt you, no reason to be afraid; but just in case, I’ll be right nearby…just in the other room. And I will always be here for you.” Now the little boy has reason to be confident. He can take heart that his father has his back.

Like everything else, courage is a construct built on some kind of foundation. And Caleb’s courage is built on the foundation of God’s faithfulness. He’s brave in the face of these giants because he knows what God has promised.

You see, Caleb and the other explorers were dealing with the same data. There’s no doubt that the Anakites and the others were huge people. The Israelites all agreed that “we seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes.”

But when the other explorers saw big people they saw big problems, and they made God small.

When Caleb saw big people, he saw an even bigger God; and that made his problems seem small in comparison.

My friend Matt writes this:

I often see bigger problems and bigger people than I see how big my God is!

The truth is that God is big and people and problems are small.

But it takes faith to see it that way.

What are you dealing with right now where God is calling for faith from you and you’ve been feeling like grasshopper?

You may be a grasshopper. But you are God’s grasshopper, and He is big enough. <http://matt-mitchell.blogspot.com/2007/04/matts-messages-retreat-of-unbelief.html>

Caleb was confident that if God was with them, the Israelites would devour those giants. His courage didn’t come from himself, or from his circumstances, it came from the Lord.

So what about you? Where do you find your confidence? What is your conviction? Does your heart melt in fear when trouble comes your way, or are you wholehearted in your commitment to God?

Kyle Idleman, in a book called *Don’t Give Up* writes this:

We don’t give up because, no matter what we’re facing, Jesus is better. No matter how deep the hole, Jesus is deeper. No matter how dark the prognosis, Jesus brings light that chases the dark away… When you are facing a frightening situation, you fix your eyes on your source of strength. Children look to their parents. Players look to their coaches. Citizens turn to their leaders in times of crisis. [And Christians “fix our eyes on Jesus.” (Heb. 12:2)]…

[Jesus is better.] Better than anything you can buy, anything you can add to your portfolio. He’s better than any website or relationship, any new fad or approach. He’s better than anything. He is better than being ruled by worry over your problems, better than serving another hour of slavery to the impulses and temptations that bring you down.

He’s better than accepting a marriage that isn’t what God designed it to be, a job that isn’t glorifying him in the way you know it could, or a family that isn’t thriving in the power of his special presence and blessing.

He is better than your past, better than your present, and better than the most wonderful future you can imagine…

Jesus is better. Put your confidence in him. Take heart. Don’t give up. (p. 206-207; 216-218)

***Still Strong***There’s more to Caleb’s story, though. Not only did Caleb stay wholehearted even as everyone else’s heart melted in fear; he remained wholehearted for the rest of his life. Back to his conversation with Joshua **in Joshua 14:**

**10**“Now then, just as the Lord promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the wilderness. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! **11**I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. **12**Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.”

Here’s what gets me about Caleb’s story. Here’s why I think Caleb is a hero to pay attention to in the Old Testament. It’s 45 years later, Caleb is now an old man at 85 years old, and he hasn’t forgotten God’s promises to him! He just as feisty, just as confident, just as eager to go in and battle those giants.

I read this week that Caleb’s name sounds very similar to the Hebrew name for “dog.” In that culture, dogs were not treated like pets in the same way they are today. In fact, to call someone a dog would have been considered an insult. They were not known for being cuddly, or loyal, or man’s best friend. But what they were known for was their tenacity. Their willingness to fight. And so, scholars think that Caleb’s name has a meaning somewhere along the lines of “God’s dog.” His name reflects his attitude: he wasn’t about to give up. He was spoiling for a fight.

I love the way he describes himself in verse 11: “I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out.” I know that sometimes ages in the Bible seem longer than what we are used to. Sometimes characters in the Bible are doing things at an advanced age that don’t seem normal to us. But the whole point of Caleb mentioning his age is that even in that time 85 would be considered old. Even at that time 85 would be considered a time to move to the sidelines. But not for Caleb, he’s still itching for a fight. And he gets it. **Verses 13-15:**

**13**Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. **14**So Hebron has belonged to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the Lord, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly. **15**(Hebron used to be called Kiriath Arba after Arba, who was the greatest man among the Anakites.)

Then the land had rest from war.

Caleb waited 45 years, but he got his fight. And he didn’t waste it. He went into the hill country of Hebron and he took on the giants who lived there. And, with the Lord’s blessing, he whipped them on the battlefield.

And so, here’s our second lesson from the life of Caleb: **Be wholehearted for the long haul.** Caleb persevered. He stayed committed to God throughout His life. Age did not become an excuse. He wasn’t about to retire from his service to God.

And I want to suggest that there is a challenge there for us as well. It’s not an argument against modern day retirement. Hopefully, there will come a time for all of us where we are freed from the need to earn a regular income. An opportunity to retire from our profession. But that doesn’t mean we retire from following God. It doesn’t mean we are done serving the Lord.

God has called every Christian to serve Him. And if you are following God will all your heart, you’ll never retire from spiritual service. Serving the Lord is not a job; it’s a life-calling. The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word “vocare” which means “to call.” God has called all of His children to serve Him–it’s your real vocation–and one no Christian should ever retire from.

God isn’t through with you–whatever your age. Remember, the Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint, so keep on serving, keep on praying, keep on being available to God!

Dr. Paul Brand was a medical doctor known for his pioneering work on leprosy. His story is told in the book *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, co-written with Philip Yancey.

Eventually, after the book and after his research was done, Dr. Brand moved into a brand new Christian retirement home. And at the dedication of this new facility, Dr. Brand was asked to give a few remarks. He said something along these lines:

I remember well when I was at my physical peak. I was 27 years old and had just finished medical school. A group of friends and I were mountain climbing, and we could climb for hours. For some people, when they cross that peak, for them life is over.

I remember well my mental peak, too. I was 57 years of age and was performing groundbreaking hand surgery. All of my medical training was coming together in one place. For some people, when they cross this peak, for them life is over.

I'm now over 80 years of age. I recently realized I'm approaching another peak—my spiritual peak. All I have sought to become as a person has the opportunity to come together in wisdom, maturity, kindness, love, joy, and peace. And I realize when I cross that peak, for me, life will not be over; it will have just begun.

Dr. Brand followed the example of Caleb. With his confidence built firmly on the Lord, He knew that he could remain wholeheartedly committed to God for the long-haul.

So, what about you? Do you want to be a Caleb? Do you want to be a bulldog for Jesus?

Be wholehearted. Keep your eyes on His promises. And make plans to stay committed for the long-haul.

I read a poem about Caleb this week that I think captures his spirit:

He stood before Joshua with flashing eyes;
“Give me this mountain before I die!”
“But Caleb, you’re old and the mountain is high;
Choose a peaceful spot on this plain to die;
The people who live on the mountain are strong;
The battle you fight will be bloody and long.”

His eyes never wavered as he spoke without fear;
“I’ve been promised this mountain for 45 years!
And as for the people being mighty and tall;
The bigger they are, the harder they fall!
For it’s not my strength on which I’m countin’;
For the Lord is going to give me that mountain;
So let’s quit talking while it is still light;
For the Lord and I have a battle to fight!”

(Author unknown)